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Constructive journalism

Chrysi Dagoula, University of Groningen

Danielle Batist is a freelance journalist and editor who embraces an entrepreneurial and positive approach to journalism. She has lived and worked in several countries around the globe. In the fifteen years she has been working as a journalist, she has developed an interest in social change, which she pursued in her work as the editor of the International Network of Street Papers (INSP), reaching six million readers in over 40 countries, and which underpins her current focus on 'Constructive Journalism' – a project she co-founded in 2014. Drawing on a variety of behavioural and audience studies, constructive journalism can be defined as 'as rigorous, compelling reporting that includes positive and solution- focused elements in order to empower audiences and present a fuller picture of truth, while upholding journalism's core functions and ethics' – in other words, an approach that attempts to bring positive elements to conventional reporting. By using a 'wellbeing' model of the world instead of a 'disease' model, stories about what is working – rather than just what is broken – become part of the news eco-system. Last year, Danielle got involved in the re-launch of Positive News, founded in 1993 and re-launched in 2016 as a magazine. The publication showcases a new model for media ownership, as well as a new way to tell news stories. Owned by a community of 1526 journalists, readers and supporters from 33 countries, the magazine features 'Constructive Conversation', where thought leaders are challenged to find common ground; 'Solutions Lab', where forward-thinking responses to difficult social issues are unearthed; 'What Happened Next?' where stories reported upon previously are updated. All these aspects are highlighted in a conversation with Danielle Batist, who gives her insight on the discussed matters.

Why do you do 'constructive journalism'?

First and foremost, out of a desire to do journalism in a way that is more reflective of what I think is happening in the world. I think that what traditionally was the case for journalism – and still is for many mainstream media – is that there is a bias to what is being reported. What is going wrong in the world is an important part of what is happening, but I think that there is another part of the story that is not always told. This is about opportunity and possibility

and sometimes it is about good news. This is often seen as 'fluff' or as entertainment or as light-hearted news, whereas I have always felt that there was a real need to tell stories about the genuine positive change that is also happening.

I realized this when working as a journalist in southern Africa. As a reporter or correspondent you realize that editors usually want the story about what is going wrong. I got this sense of disconnect between what I was able to report and what I saw was also happening. At the same time, I never wanted to ignore some of the severe problems. When I reported from conflict areas, I saw the same thing: that in the middle of all the misery, there was often resilience. There were things working, there were other things going on as well, and I got more and more fed up with not being able to somehow include that as part of the full picture.

In the definition of 'constructive journalism' you refer to the 'empowerment of audiences'. How does that work in practical terms?

We define constructive journalism as rigorous, compelling reporting that includes positive and solution-focused elements in order to empower audiences and present a fuller picture of truth, while upholding journalism's core functions and ethics. It really is about taking the audience seriously even if you report on positive stories. A classic example is the 'And Finally' at the end of a news bulletin. You get half an hour of misery, and then the presenter says: 'Oh, and there is also a panda born in the zoo'. As if the audience is no cleverer than that.

They do of course see through it; they know that is not representative of the actual good news that is happening in the real world. And while it might cheer them up, ultimately they won't be satisfied by a news item of a panda born in the zoo. That is not good enough. And it is not reflective of what is happening in the world.

At the Constructive Journalism Project, rather than a positive picture, we want to give a fuller picture. It can be good, it can be bad, but the whole point is that it can be both. Beyond that, there is a lot of research at the moment about what is happening when you give people a piece of constructive news. People remember the story better, are more likely to share it on social media, more likely to follow up and they are more excited about it. This is not because it is entertainment – it is because they feel they can actually do something. Audience studies around the world show that people feel deflated, depressed and negative after watching an

average news bulletin, most people feel that there is nothing they can do. In my opinion this leads in something worse: that people become desensitized and switch off altogether. If you want your journalism to somehow contribute to change, then you need your audiences to be switched on.

How the positive nature of Constructive Journalism continues to draw on reader curiosity?

Our research has shown that constructive journalism not only mitigates some of the detrimental psychological impact from reading predominantly negative news, but actively promotes a more positive response including increased feelings of hope, optimism, self-efficacy, altruistic behaviour, and higher levels of engagement.

You describe yourself as interested in ‘change makers’: Do you see your work changing journalism?

I hope that in some ways it might. We have started very small and now we can see that there are people, in different areas and in different countries, working in this field. We have been working with journalism schools around the United Kingdom and beyond, with researchers in universities, and through workshops with freelancers and with journalists in newsrooms.

When we start explaining some of the principles of constructive journalism, so many journalists, whatever experience they have, say things like: ‘I have always felt that is what I wanted to report, but I never realized that there is a terminology for it’. That is similar to what I initially thought when I started out in a newsroom: I think for many journalists, this is instinctive, and not at all far removed from what they want journalism to be.

How do you position your work in the broader scope of changes that journalism and news are experiencing in digital environments?

There is still a lot to be done. We just re-launched the positive news platform, for example, and we need to completely re-think what we can do online. We need to re-invent completely how we engage with audiences. We are very interested in what happens in a comment thread when you give a story a more constructive angle. It is just amazing to see how much more

acceptance there is, for instance, of opposing views. This has been true of constructive debate online in particular. Debates are much more constructive by nature, people debate with each other in a much more grown-up way and even when there is disagreement, there is very little abuse and we rarely have to moderate or remove comments. But beyond this, who says that the story needs to end when it appears in a paper, magazine or on a website? One of the things that we are going to try is to get the audiences more actively involved, asking them to propose what we should write about and get them to vote on what stories they would like to see produced. Audiences become a much more active community this way. They become a part of the entire production process of journalism, rather than just a passive group who gets presented with the end product with, at best, a chance to comment afterwards.

You have worked for a number of different types of news organizations: what excites you about what you do now? What would you change? Are there any limitations?

For me it is a whole lot of things coming together. There was a moment when I just realized that I needed to re-invent, and I still feel like I have to re-invent all the time because the business models are changing, because everything about journalism is changing. For me, the next step is to change some of the ways that we do journalism, and constructive journalism is an integral part of that. I have always been amazed how traditional newsrooms are often still clubs of 'grey men in grey suits' who decide everything. In a lot of places, it is still very much like this, and it often leads to a lot of red tape and slow progress when it comes to any innovation. What surprised me too is how averse to change some journalists are. I am amazed that as journalists we are so critical of every single thing in the world we report on, but somehow many of us are really failing to be critical of our own profession. When it comes to the core principles of journalism, many are nervous to discuss change. Take the famous 'Five Ws' of reporting a story: Who, What, When, Where and Why? When I first heard these, we were told we could simply add on a sixth: 'What Now?', I thought: 'Now this is where the interesting bit starts'. As journalists working in the 'Twitter era', we often are not reporting the latest, immediate, news anymore: our role is more and more that of a context provider, and a reliable guide through the maze of free information. That is where we can truly add value to our audiences. For me, the 'What now?' question makes everything more interesting. I often leave a story thinking 'what now?' and I think that the audience probably wonders the

same. So being able to address some of these issues and get new insights and comments has been a lot more fulfilling in my own career.

I also do not think that constructive journalism and 'good journalism' are separate things. I think constructive journalism builds on the principles of great journalism. We still have a lot of that legacy to deal with, and much of that is good. There are a lot of really good principles that come from traditional journalism which we should not lose when we do something new, including working online. I think that this is the hardest part, but also probably the most interesting part: having to do both.

Another important aspect is funding. When innovating we are so often constrained by having to reinvent pay models at the same time. Crowdfunding, in many ways can offer possibilities. For positive news, we did not ask for simple donations, but instead built a funding-model around co-ownership. We actually asked people to become owners of the organization in a cooperative model. In doing this, we are testing new business models as well as new ways of doing journalism at the same time.

What is the biggest misunderstanding of your work?

It has to be that it is often seen as 'fluff' and not serious journalism. We get this over and over and I think we'll have to keep fight this misunderstanding for a while longer. Some people just cannot see how good news can be news. It is that whole theory that it is so ingrained in journalism: when something is good, it has to be PR, or advocacy, it cannot be really serious journalism. I think that this is the biggest misunderstanding, because as soon as you drill down into what constructive journalism does, you realize it can be serious and still cover something positive. We have to simply investigate solutions just as critically as we investigate problems. You can ask the same kind of critical questions about what you can do about a problem. When people engage with the content, they get it straight away; it is only in the first instance that some are sceptical. Funnily enough, that is particularly true of journalists, as most audiences tend to get it right away.

What role do you see freelancers playing in changing the journalistic landscape – if they play a role?

They definitely play a huge role. I am a freelancer myself and I am always interested in the role of freelancers as change agents. Mainly because they can move fast, without the restrictions of big organizations and legacy media. And our numbers are growing, as so many people by choice or force become freelancers nowadays. There are very few options out there for the staff jobs many of us were trained to do. Freelancers form a massive pool of journalists, so we have to take them seriously. One interesting thing that I see coming out of the constructive journalism workshops is that if you compare what happens in workshops in newsrooms versus small ones with freelancers, freelancers implement some of these things the next day. We literally give them some tools, they go home and the next story they pitch is a constructive story. In the newsrooms people see what is happening, they take it in and then the next question that they get from their editor is: 'so do we now need to get a person to be a constructive correspondent?'. Sometimes they appoint a person to look on the bright side, others just carry on as they always did. Implementing change and changing news-rooms and changing news cultures in an organization that is 100 years old is much harder, whereas freelancers can change their approach straight away.

But I think that freelancers, start-ups and smaller, alternative media can also experiment more and set examples in many ways. For example, we developed the 'Constructive Conversation' feature in Positive News, where two people that do not agree on something are asked a difficult question. We say to each of them: 'you have 300 words to write your column with your viewpoint'. What makes the difference is that we then give them another week and we send them each other's column, and they have to find at least one point of agreement and elaborate on why they agree and where collaboration might be possible. It is amazing to see the conversation that arrives at the end of it. You learn so much more from that, so that whole idea that debate has to be clashing to be interesting or to be critical is disrupted. We are saying, and I very much believe, that consensus can be tougher than conflict. Instead of asking them to criticize each other, you can ask politicians 'what part of this opponent's policy can you actually work with?'. That is much more challenging for them to answer, and yet that is how any sort of coalition is forged and how a solution may be developed. I think it is this kind of bridge building that can lead to a healthier society. It is satisfying for journalists, and

audiences love it, because it might mean that they can actually see change in their world, or at least feel that there is some hope and possibility out there. I have seen it myself as a freelancer, but I also see it all around me: the most innovative stories and change making ideas often come from people that are not in the 'grey men in the grey suit' culture. In that sense, the changing media landscape is a blessing for the innovation of our profession. And the playing field as a result of digital transformation means that there is no excuse for journalists not to experiment. I believe we should all become 'journopreneurs'.

Contributor details

Chrysi Dagoula is an assistant professor in the Department of Media Studies and Journalism, at the University of Groningen. She earned her Ph.D., titled 'The ongoing structural transformations of the digital public sphere(s): The role of journalism', in 2017 from the University of Sheffield. Her research reflects her broader academic interests in the developments in digital journalism and in digital political communication, especially regarding the effect of social media on journalism, as well as the diachronic relationships between journalism and democracy within public sphere theory. Her expertise also includes digital and social media research.

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